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“O Brave New World...”: Chancellor Sam Schuman's presentation to University of Minnesota Board of Regents, October 10, 2003

Summary:

(October 10, 2003)-

Shakespeare's last magnificent comedy, *The Tempest*, is for me one of his most complex, subtle, ambiguous and greatest plays. It tells the story of old Prospero, a student of the liberal arts who becomes so enraptured by his books that he loses his grand and rich dukedom and is banished to a tiny and remote island. But the island is a magic one, with all that's needed to sustain a simple and studious life. In addition to his daughter, Miranda, Prospero's remote island is inhabited by an army of spirits. In the play, a group of royal visitors...the King of Naples, the Duke of Milan... land on the island, and are led a merry chase by Prospero and those who work with and for him there. We welcome you royal visitors to this, our rather remote, small, simple, but magical island, where we have what we need to sustain life, and all the time and books necessary to live a life of enchantment with the liberal arts. And, we say to our visitors, as Prospero's daughter said to theirs, with amazement,

O, Wonder

How many goodly creatures are there here!

How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world

That has such people in't.

For nine years now I have been attending Regents' meetings. I have heard, almost monthly, pleas and injunctions to bring before the Board issues of weight and substance, and not to waste your time with housekeeping details or self-serving institutional puffery. Today I want to give you all steak and no sizzle. I'm not going to talk about how UMM has the highest student satisfaction rates within the University of Minnesota, or the highest retention to graduation statistics. I am not going to brag about the promise and performance of our students, the scholarship and teaching of our faculty, or the prideful and service-oriented work of our staff. Nor will you be hearing about how UMM is ranked #3 among the nation's public liberal arts colleges in this year's USNews rankings, or any of our other top rankings. There will be no discussion of our recent campus classification as a National Historic District, nor of our Capital Campaign's achievement of 160% of its fund raising goal, nor of our \$50 million in wonderful new facilities within the past half-dozen years, including a campus/community recreation center which is a national model. (Of course, if you have queries about these things, I would of course be delighted to respond to them.) Instead I am going to try to suggest a serious answer to the biggest question of all: why should the University of Minnesota, and the people of the State of Minnesota, be supporting a small selective public liberal arts college, here and now.

Presidents Yudof and Bruininks, and the Regents, and my colleagues here at the Morris campus were so generous as to award me a 6 week leave last winter. The purpose of the leave was to work on a book on small colleges, which is soon to be published by the Johns Hopkins University Press. That work has led me to conclude that there are two, closely related areas in which small colleges offer unique and uniquely valuable educational opportunities. Those areas might be described under the overarching titles of “community” and “integrity” or “integration.” Let me first say a few words about 4 qualities that fall under the umbrella of “community” then turn to 2 within the category of “integrity.”

Every small college brags in its admissions materials that it offers “community.” In my book, I quote a depressingly long and tediously similar set of such boasts. But what does this word really mean?

1. Small institutions such as UMM can have a sharply focused mission. An interesting experiment would be to walk out on our campus and ask the first 10 people you met – students, faculty, staff administrators and janitors, freshmen and alumni – “What is the mission of UMM?” I am comfortable that at least 9 of those 10, and probably all of them, would say the same thing (they would say, in one form or another, “to be a great, co-educational undergraduate public liberal arts college”. I don’t think that would happen on Washington Ave at the bus stop. There, you would encounter a fascinating diversity of interesting answers, but they would not all be the same. So one thing “community” connotes is a setting where everyone shares some of the same essential goals and values and dreams.

2. *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam is a fascinating, and surprisingly best selling book published in 2000. He documents, and laments, what he calls the loss of “social capital” in contemporary society – the willingness of the individual to act for the good of the greater community. I would argue that small colleges are very nearly ideal laboratories for the inculcation of that quality. Small colleges thrive and prosper to the extent that their populations are willing to sacrifice for the common good. At the opening convocation every academic year at UMM, I tell first year students that when I was a freshman, it was common for speakers on such occasions to say “look to the left, look to the right, one of the people you have just seen will be gone by the end of the year.” I tell them, on the contrary, “look to the left, look to the right, now think about how you can help both the people you just saw to have a successful career here at UMM.” We are creating social capital and men and women who will be the civic leaders of the next half-century.

3. Small colleges are exceptionally rich intellectual seedbeds, of necessity, of interdisciplinarity. At UMM, virtually every one of our 120 faculty members is going to know all the other 120. They will eat together in our one café, exercise together in the one fitness center in Morris, sit next to each other at plays and concerts, and this proximity will extend to intellectual as well as social contact. Faculty members at small colleges talk to each other about the connections and differences between their disciplines, and the ways in which each other’s teaching and research interact with theirs. A typical table at lunch here might include a geologist mentioning some new discovery about the glaciers of Sweden, which would lead a sociologist to speculate about the Swedish-Americans in West Central Minnesota and what they must have thought of our land forms as immigrants, compared to what they found at home, which would provoke a historian to compare the Swedish immigration pattern to that of more recent Minnesotans such as Hmong or Somali residents, which would lead the Admissions director to mention our new initiative to recruit more Hmong students, which might in turn lead the Geologist to suggest some ways to recruit students from Sweden, which would invite the Psychologist to talk about the subliminal influences on college choice, and...you get the picture.

4. Small college communities also encourage student/teacher relationships over time. One of my greatest frustrations when I taught undergraduates at Northwestern University (back in the Jurassic era) was that I would see my students for one quarter then 95% of them would disappear forever. At a small college, students will take two or three or four courses from the same professor over time. We see our students grow, we see how what we taught them as freshmen influences how they think and speak and write as seniors. And, we bump into them, too at those concerts, lunch tables, fitness centers, etc. If I may be crude, it is the difference between a motel and a home. We all get to know each other, as individual people, with all our quirks and glories, brilliance and blind spots, and we watch each other grow and change and learn.

Obviously, such a close, focused, connected community is not without liabilities. Some students and some faculty feel a place like UMM is like living in a fishbowl, and they are not unjustified in that impression. This is a community where probably a quarter or a third of the campus knows what color my dog is, and that I like to play catch with her at the end of the workday. Not everybody is comfortable with that kind of constant closeness. For most of us, though, the shared and focused sense of mission, constant interplay across academic disciplines, and opportunities for many learning mentoring relationships over time make the academic communities at small colleges enormously attractive.

Perhaps even more important is the second area of small college uniqueness, what I call “integrity” or “integration.” A person has integrity when what she or he says and does all fits together. An institution has integrity when its programs and opportunities are mutually compatible, reinforcing, magnifying. Small colleges such as this one can offer a unique

opportunity for individuals to live coherent lives and for the college itself to practice across all its programs – curricular, co-curricular, extra-curricular and residential – what it preaches. How do we do this?

1. First, we offer opportunities for students (and faculty and staff) to become deeply engaged in the life of the college across a very wide spectrum of activities. Consider, just as one great example, athletics. UMM has about 300 varsity student athletes out of just under 2000 students. UM-TC has only a bit more than twice that number of student athletes for a student body 17 or so times larger. Any student who wants to can play a varsity sport here. Or sing in a choir or act in a play or be active in student government. Some try to do it all most do a lot. Whether it is a co-curricular activity which complements a class – such as acting in a play while studying dramatic literature – or an extracurricular opportunity – such as the juggling club (which seems to have no connection to the Physics program), a religious organization, an intramural sport, the swing-dance club, the splat-ball club or whatever, UMM students all have multiple opportunities for engagement across the spectrum of campus life. Student engagement, by the way, is almost certainly the key to retention and high graduation rates.

2. At a small institution, the curriculum can manifest the institution's values for the entire community. At UMM we say that an awareness of environmental issues, informed by nuanced, scientific data, not myth or political partisanship, is a requirement of good citizenship. So, we have built such course work into our general education requirements (as well as being an institutional leader in purchasing wind-generated energy, and working with the community to seek alternative energy solutions such as biomass co-generation). We say we value internationalism, and every student is required to take courses in an subject matter area we call awkwardly The Global Village. Much more dramatically, we are developing a program in which every single UMM student will study abroad, at no extra charge, as an integral part of the undergraduate experience. We believe in civic responsibility and have built it into our graduation requirements and a very pervasive and growing program of service learning. We teach what we believe, and we believe what we teach, and we are small enough to do it for everyone.

As a top-rank liberal arts college, with a focused mission and a deliberately small population, we can offer – indeed, almost mandate – an undergraduate experience which is balanced and coherent and integrated, one in which what you do in the afternoon and the evening fits what you do in the morning. I like to think of such a successful small college undergraduate experience as being like a work of art – it has a beginning, a middle and an end, it has a frame, it is rich and diverse, but everything within it exists in a coherent relationship with everything else.

But enough philosophy, enough citation of graduation requirements and statistics. Let me put a human face on this. Let us imagine together a typical good UMM student, part of our community, leading a life of undergraduate integrity. Let's say this student comes from the rural upper Midwest (as do most UMM students), is a woman and has a Native American heritage (our largest minority are American Indians). She graduated from high school in the top 10% of her class, and at UMM is a dual major in Political Science and theater. Her faculty advisor, a political science professor, has worked to develop a nomination for her as a Truman scholar, an honor that if she receives it will offer a very generous scholarship for graduate school in preparation for a career in public service. And, indeed, public service has not just been something our student studied in political science classes, but has lived. She has done an internship in Washington DC in the Department of Agriculture, Office of Civil Rights (where she helped organize a Black Farmers Summit) and also worked at a not-for-profit organization in South Dakota which serves abused children. Her plans after graduation are to go to law school to focus on Native American legal policy. Last year she made Dean's List both semesters. She works as an Assistant in the Office of Student Activities on campus. In her spare time, she has served on campus as an Orientation Group Leader, a student representative on our Retention Task Force, and participated as an actor and designer in several drama productions. This is an undergraduate career of integrity. Course work, major, internships, activities, it all hangs together. Each dimension of this student's college life illuminates the others.

I assume you have already figured out that this hypothetical, archetypical UMM student is not a fictional construct, but a real person, and of course you are right. What you may not have yet figured out is that another of this young woman's activities, beautifully integrated with her study and work in civic engagement, is serving as the student representative from UMM to the Board of Regents this year. I've been describing Johanna Farmer. I embarrass Johanna NOT because she is an exceptional student, although she is pretty darn good, but because her story is retold by hundreds of students on this campus now, and thousands who have been here, and it is a small college story. Minnesota and the world need the

kind of cutting edge research scholarship a cosmopolitan major university like the University of Minnesota Twin Cities can provide. But Minnesota and the world need Johanna Farmers and UMM every bit as much. That is why we are worth your attention and support, worth the investment of the legislature and people of this great state, worth even the drive. That is why, in the treasure chest of this splendid university, the University of Minnesota Morris is a pearl without price.

Through personal and academic discovery, the University of Minnesota, Morris provides opportunities for students to grow intellectually, engage in community, experience environmental stewardship and celebrate diversity. A renewable and sustainable educational experience, Morris prepares graduates for careers, for advanced degrees, for lifelong learning, for work world flexibility in the future, and for global citizenship. Learn more about Morris at morris.umn.edu or call 888-866-3382.